

Gratitude Foundation



*“Were not ten cleansed? Where are the other nine?
Has only this foreigner returned to give thanks to God?”*

(Lk. 17:15-17)

The Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time—Year B

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“In all things give thanks, it is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus”

(1 Thess: 5:18)

Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Reading 1

Isaiah 35:4-7a

Thus says the LORD:
Say to those whose hearts are frightened:
Be strong, fear not!
Here is your God,
he comes with vindication;
with divine recompense
he comes to save you.
Then will the eyes of the blind be opened,
the ears of the deaf be cleared;
then will the lame leap like a stag,
then the tongue of the mute will sing.
Streams will burst forth in the desert,
and rivers in the steppe.
The burning sands will become pools,
and the thirsty ground, springs of water.

Responsorial Psalm

Psalm 146:6-7, 8-9, 9-10

R. (1b) Praise the Lord, my soul!

The God of Jacob keeps faith forever,
secures justice for the oppressed,
gives food to the hungry.
The LORD sets captives free.

R. Praise the Lord, my soul!

The LORD gives sight to the blind;
the LORD raises up those who were bowed down.
The LORD loves the just;
the LORD protects strangers.

R. Praise the Lord, my soul!

The fatherless and the widow the LORD sustains,
but the way of the wicked he thwarts.
The LORD shall reign forever;
your God, O Zion, through all generations.
Alleluia.

R. Praise the Lord, my soul!

Reading 2

James 2:1-5

My brothers and sisters, show no partiality
as you adhere to the faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ.
For if a man with gold rings and fine clothes
comes into your assembly,
and a poor person in shabby clothes also comes in,
and you pay attention to the one wearing the fine clothes
and say, "Sit here, please, "
while you say to the poor one, "Stand there, " or "Sit at my feet, "
have you not made distinctions among yourselves
and become judges with evil designs?

Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters.
Did not God choose those who are poor in the world
to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom
that he promised to those who love him?

Alleluia

Cf. Matthew 4:23

R. **Alleluia, alleluia.**

Jesus proclaimed the Gospel of the kingdom
and cured every disease among the people.

R. **Alleluia, alleluia.**

Gospel

Mark 7:31-37

Again Jesus left the district of Tyre
and went by way of Sidon to the Sea of Galilee,
into the district of the Decapolis.
And people brought to him a deaf man who had a speech impediment
and begged him to lay his hand on him.
He took him off by himself away from the crowd.
He put his finger into the man's ears
and, spitting, touched his tongue;
then he looked up to heaven and groaned, and said to him,
"Ephphatha!" — that is, "Be opened!" —
And immediately the man's ears were opened,
his speech impediment was removed,
and he spoke plainly.
He ordered them not to tell anyone.
But the more he ordered them not to,
the more they proclaimed it.
They were exceedingly astonished and they said,
"He has done all things well.
He makes the deaf hear and the mute speak."

Exegesis

Isaiah 35:4-7a

Chapter 35 of *Isaiah* is entitled *Israel's Deliverance*. Many scholars feel that its composition occurred near the end of the Babylonian Exile. Chapter 34 speaks of the judgement upon Edom. Edom was a nation to the south and east that pillaged the land of the Israelites after they were destroyed and dispersed by the Babylonians. With the destruction of Edom, the path of desolate land now extends south of Israel through the Arabah desert.

The Prophet Isaiah has a vision of the power saving hand of God restoring the Promised Land. His first call is for people to fear not and to be strong. They are encouraged to have faith in the saving power of God to save and restore their lives and their land. Streams of living water will burst from the parched desert floor. Life will spring forth. Deafness and blindness will be restored. The mute tongue will sing for joy as salvation breaks forth.

Psalm 146:6-7, 8-9, 9-10

Psalm 146 is an individual hymn of praise to God. Verses 1 – 5 consists of praise to God the creator. The Psalm begins with the doxology, *Hallelujah! Praise the Lord my soul*. Verse 6 begins *The maker of heaven and earth and the seas and all that is in them*.

Verse 6b continues where our pericope begins, *It is the Lord who preserves fidelity forever*. The following verses praise the saving power of God, the salvific hand of God in human history. God setting people free from slavery and providing bread for the hungry recall the power of God in the Exodus experience. The Prophet Isaiah connects the gift of sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf to the freeing of captives (See Isa 42:7, 61:1). Sing praise to Yahweh who comes to save His people, to set them free and to feed and sustain them on the journey.

James 2:1-5

Throughout *James* God is calling us to put faith into action, e.g. *faith without works is dead*. (Jas 2:17). Faith is not something that is merely theoretical or abstract, it is a way of living. The beginning of Chapter 2 is entitled *Sin of Partiality*. James is observing unchristian practices in the early Church. People are being judged by appearance and separated by apparent economic status.

Verse 14 of Chapter 2 begins a section entitled *Faith and Works* which is the heart of the *Letter of James*. Our pericope provides the foundation or the introduction to the primary teaching of James.

James is writing in a time of great economic and social divide. Israel is surrounded by Greek and Roman cultural influences which exacerbate that division. The Christian is called out of that world. God loves indiscriminately with no partiality. Each one of us is called to love as God loves. Authentic love is the font from which good moral conduct and works of mercy flow. Unconditional love is foundational to the Christian life. It requires a blindness to outward appearance. It demands a spiritual sight as enlightened by Christ. It requires deafness to worldly voices and an ear for the internal whisper of God.

Exegesis (Continued)

Mark 7:31-37

In our passage today Jesus is continuing His journey through Gentile territory. It begins by detailing His journey which highlights the fact that He is intentionally moving through Gentile land. By leaving Tyre for the Sea of Galilee by way of Sidon tells us that He is not traveling the shortest route but making a Northern sweep on His way. As we see throughout the Gospels word of His fame is proceeding Him on His way. Enough faith is spreading such that people are bringing others to him who are in need of healing. They have enough hope in His power to heal that they bring them to Him and beg Jesus to intervene. Real healing and faith then result from the personal encounter with Jesus.

It is important to be mindful of the fact that Scripture includes a physical and historical dimension and a deeper Spiritual reality. The physical healing and miracles of Jesus signify a deeper spiritual healing. For example, the physical healing of the persons physical hearing is symbolic of a deeper hearing of the heart and soul, an openness to hear the word of God. The man is restored his voice that he may proclaim the Gospel.

The Greek word that is used for “deaf” is *kophos* which means total complete inability to hear. Deafness signifies a great hardship as it causes alienation and isolation, the inability to communicate especially in the illiterate oral society of the time. The Prophet Isaiah sees the gift of sight to the blind and hearing to the deaf as one of the great gifts of the saving hand of God (See Isa 35:5-6, 42:19). These words also echo God’s words to Moses in Exodus 4:11: “Who gives one person speech? Who makes another mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord?”

They begged Him to lay His hand on him. The Greek word for “beg” is *parakalein* which means *to intervene for*. It is the verb form of the word that we translate as “Paraclete” in the *Gospel of John*. In the *Last Supper Discourse* Jesus speaks of the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, whom He will send as an advocate, someone who intervenes for us. The request, i.e. *parakalein*, for healing is an integral part of numerous miracles, e.g. Mark 1:40, 5:23 and 8:22. The request for healing or wholeness is the initiating step in the healing process.

We are told that the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus at His baptism and remained with Him. At His baptism we are told that Heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit was seen as a dove descending upon Him. The Greek word for “opened” is *ephphatha*. It is the word that Jesus interjects in His Aramaic speech to call upon the Holy Spirit to open the ears of the deaf person. Interestingly Jesus blocks the man’s ears which would signify closing out the noise of the world and opening the heart and soul, the innermost man, to the voice of God.

The fact that the man was now able to speak clearly is the concrete audible and visible sign of the physical miracle. At the spiritual level the man is now able to hear the word of God and to proclaim the Gospel with his voice and with his life. It is a fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah that God will restore the hearing and the voice of the deaf and mute and the sight to the blind in the Messianic age. Jesus working these miracles in Gentile territory is a clear revelation that Jesus came to save all people, Jew and Gentile alike. The day of salvation is at hand.

Reflection

When I read the readings for this weekend my thoughts kept turning to the baptism of Jesus. At first, I was not sure why. Then I realized that it was the word, “*ephphatha*” – that is “be opened”. Recall when Jesus was coming up out of the water of the Jordan River; the heavens were opened, and the Spirit was seen in the form of a dove descending upon Jesus. God opened the flow of His own divine life unto the world. That flow of divine life has a conduit. It flows into and through Jesus. Jesus is now standing in the water in solidarity with all of humanity and so it flows into us through Him.

In our first reading, the Prophet Isaiah talks about the burning sands becoming pools of water, and the thirsty ground becoming springs of living water. He talks about the eyes of the blind being opened, and the ears of the deaf being cleared. All of this, of course, points to this weekend’s Gospel where Jesus opens the ears of the person who is deaf and has a speech impediment. As he places his finger in the man’s ears Jesus says, “*Ephphatha*” that is “*Be opened*”. When fingers are placed into ears, the ears become blocked to outside noise. It is the interior of the person that is being opened to the flow of divine life. In a similar way the spit that Jesus places on the man’s tongue represents the inner life of Jesus entering the inner life of the deaf man. When the heart is opened the divine life flows in.

At our baptism the priest or the deacon standing in the place of Jesus, i.e. in *persona Christi*, in the person of Jesus, prays the *Ephphatha* prayer: “The Lord Jesus made the deaf hear and the dumb speak. May He soon touch your ears to receive His word, and your mouth to proclaim His faith, to the praise and glory of God the Father.” The way to God has been opened to each of us at our baptism. Every time that we turn away from God, we stifle the flow of divine life that is available to us. Every time that we turn back to God, we reconnect with the flow of divine life that is always there. If we allow ourselves to be filled with God’s life, which we call grace, then we become like the desert that pools up with living water. The stream of God’s love will flow through us onto the world.

The waters of our own baptism never stop flowing. All we have to do is to open our hearts to receive this amazing gift. Recall the words of Jesus taken from the 7th Chapter of John’s Gospel: “If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in Me as the Scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.’” (Jn 7:38)

May the rivers God’s love flow out of the doors of our hearts.

Come Holy Spirit fill the hearts of us Your faithful and enkindle in us the fire of Your love. Amen.

Yours in Christ,



Personal Witness

I have a good friend who is married with three children. His children consist of three boys who were one year apart in age. I look back on the struggles that he and his wife endured when all three were teenagers. At one time my friend confided in me that the struggles they were experiencing was really putting a strain on their marriage. In the depth of their struggles, I was at their home watching a football game. It was the Sunday before the New Year. My friend told me that his New Year's resolution was to work on marital and family communication, and he asked me for my advice. I told him to make it a priority and most importantly to work on listening intentionally.

I stopped by the house on a Sunday evening in early January. The Packers were playing the evening game. I walked through the back door into the kitchen area. My friend had just gotten home from work and was sitting at the breakfast nook eating supper. The television on the kitchen counter was on for the pregame. He was facing away from me. I walked past him into the dining room where his youngest son was sitting at the table doing his homework. He had headphones on that I could hear clearly as they were so loud. It was some sort of rap music. I walked past him. His mother was in the computer room focused on the computer screen. The middle son was in the living room with the television on quite loud. The oldest son was obviously downstairs in his room as the floor was vibrating from the loud music that he was playing. I had walked through the entire house and no one had discovered that I was even there. I walked back into the kitchen and asked my friend, "So, how is the family communication going?" At first, he did not hear me. So, I asked again in a much louder voice. He answered, "Oh hi, I did not see you come in." He was a policeman trained in critical observation! Then he said, "We didn't start that yet." His home a perfect cosmos of the noisy world in which we live.

I did not realize just how noisy our world is until I experienced my first silent retreat. It was the beginning of my third year of seminary. The program at Mundelein required that our class begin the year with a seven-day silent retreat. All of us were just coming from our pastoral quarter where we were each immersed in a parish community. I felt that I was ready for full time ministry and was not looking forward to two more years of classwork and papers. I had a bad attitude and did not want to be there. Luckily my friends and I got together the day before and caught up on things. As it turned out none of us were looking forward to the silent retreat.

The first couple of days were very uncomfortable and they dragged on forever. Each night most of us individually walked around the lake, which was a 3.5-mile trail through a heavily wooded area with lots of wildlife. Many of us did that walk almost every day of our seminary stay, typically in small groups with heavy conversation. There was something different on the third night of that silent retreat. The noise seemed almost deafening; the chatter of squirrels and chipmunks, the high-pitched squeak of crickets, and the croaking of frogs

Personal Witness (Continued)

was at a decibel that I did not know was possible. I listened intently as I walked alone in the darkness and then I just stopped and listened for the longest time. At first, I wondered why nature was suddenly so loud. Then I realized that it was always like that. I had walked that same path hundreds of times over the past three years and this was the first time that I had heard the sound of God's creation.

That walk proved to be a metaphor for what I experienced next. I heard God speak to my heart in the following days in ways that I had never experienced before. God was like a constant tiny whisper in the silence of my heart. It was a life changing experience. My negative feelings about being there vanished and I was in turn overwhelmed with gratitude. I knew that I was where God wanted me to be at that moment in time. I was blessed to be in one of the world's top seminaries, studying with some of the top scripture scholars and theologians in the world, studying the works of the greatest thinkers of all time. I knew that God had chosen me, that I was a part of His plan. Twenty-seven years later those feelings of gratitude remain as strong as they were then. And all that I had to do was listen!

F. Glenn